

An Immigrant Family Full of Hope

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Coming to America from China—or moving to any country, for that matter—means taking a risk. Most immigrants will tell you that the real risk does not begin until the journey from their homeland to their new country is complete. Risking the familiar for the unfamiliar, a degree of comfort for success or failure, can sometimes be traumatic. Whatever the immigrant's goal—be it education, freedom, wealth, or all three—the immigrant learns that any dream worth pursuing does not come easy, and language and loneliness are just two of the barriers they must face along the way.

From half way around the world and over the course of eleven years, a Chinese family decided to cross the Pacific Ocean and eventually come to Illinois. The father, Jian Dong, immigrated to the United States in 1985, temporarily settling in New York City where he worked in a restaurant, with the hope of making enough money to manage his own restaurant some day.

Within two years, the first half of Jian's dream came true when in 1987, he moved from Manhattan, New York to Mattoon, Illinois, establishing himself in the restaurant business. He opened his own restaurant and called it "Happy China." Jian toiled nine years at "Happy China" before he saw his wife and three children again. In 1996, the remainder of Jian's family immigrated to the United States after his wife, Bi Dong, and children, Sherry, Tao, and Li were able to meet both the Chinese and United States immigration requirements. Although it took eleven years, the Dong family was finally reunited, and Jian had achieved the second half of his American dream.

After five years of adjusting to the strange surroundings of the United States and Mattoon in particular, Jian's eldest child and daughter, Sherry, left the family business in 2001 and moved south from Mattoon to Breese. Sherry loved the fact that she was free to move any where in the United States, but she chose to settle in southern Illinois. Sherry explained that she "wanted to pursue her own American dream." Since Breese is a small, German community, one may wonder why a Chinese immigrant would choose this town to start a business. But that is exactly what Sherry Dong did; she followed in her father's footsteps when she opened her own restaurant, "China City." When I asked why she wanted to move to Breese, Sherry told me, "I chose Breese to open 'China City' because Breese is a small, friendly town which had no Chinese restaurant, and I thought it would be good for business. I also wanted to share my customs with others." She described the Chinese as intelligent and caring people, however, "China is an oppressive country where human rights violations are common," Sherry stated. In China, women are paid significantly less than men for the same jobs. She also told me that the current law in China allows parents to have only one child per family unless the family farms, in which case families may have two children but only if the first child is a daughter. However, Sherry was quick to tell me that the family must wait a minimum of four years to have the second child.

In the past fifty years, many Asian immigrants, including the Chinese, have immigrated to the United States and have often formed what we might call "immigrant chains." Upon arriving in the United States, the Chinese, like many other immigrant groups, face discrimination. Yet, the desire to live in the land of the free and the home of the brave overpowers the fear of the unknown in a foreign land. The Chinese have proven to be outstanding citizens, and they need to be treated as such. No matter what their race, age, or heritage, each and every immigrant comes to American in pursuit of a dream as the Dong family did.

[From student historian's interview with Sherry Dong, Sept. 1, 21, and 22, 2002; Dorothy Dowdell and Joseph Dowdell, *The Chinese Helped Build America*; Patricia Lacey, *Our Illinois Heritage*, *Illinois Reading Council Journal* (Spring, 1998).]